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A Closer Look At Lie Detectors

Lie detectors are being widely misused in federal agencies. These abuses ought to be corrected.

A congressional committee investigating the use of the lie detector, or polygraph, heard one witness, Prof. Fred E. Inbau of the Northwestern University Law School, say, "Eighty per cent of the (persons operating polygraphs) do not measure up to the standards we feel are required."

This is what concerns the committee. Not because there is anything wrong with

the machine — as a machine — but because of the striking testimony that most people operating the machines have no business doing so.

The operator is the key to the effectiveness of the polygraph. Contrary to what many people believe, the polygraph does not detect lies. That is done by the person operating the device in interpreting physical signs — as recorded on a graph — or emotional changes induced by various questions.

During his testimony, Inbau strongly defended the polygraph as an investigative aid — provided the examiner is qualified. He told of numerous instances where properly administered tests have cleared innocent persons, "caught in a web of circumstances."

But he said he was disturbed over the absence of central control in the government over the use of what he said could be a "dangerous" instrument in the hands of an unqualified or unscrupulous examiner.

And of this country's 1,000 to 1,500 polygraph operators, said Inbau, between 800 and 1,200 should be doing something else.

The committee also learned that 19 federal agencies, employing 639 examiners, gave more than 23,000 tests during the last year. The Central Intelligence Agency would not provide statistics on its use of the instrument on security grounds.

There is still widespread disagreement over whether the polygraph should be used at all. Some people believe it is an invasion of personal privacy, and even its proponents agree that defining a "qualified examiner" is not easy.

But mass use of the machine by unqualified people is clearly a mistake. Not only can they snoop unnecessarily into the private affairs of people being examined, but this is the kind of information that could be used for blackmail by unscrupulous examiners.

The dangers of the present system far outweigh the investigative advantages of the polygraph. The loose polygraph operations ought to be pulled taut.